

The Reason for Being of our Federal Courts

José A. Fusté
Chief Judge
U.S. District Court

The purpose of this column is to provide interesting and easy-to-understand information to our community about the Federal Court. I will try to explain and exemplify what is the Federal Court, its mission and how it is carried out.

The U.S. District Court is an institution created by the Constitution of the United States, and its mission is to resolve controversies between citizens through a legal process. The controversy comes before the court when the parties fail to reach an agreement and need an arbiter to analyze their positions and order measures that will put an end to the controversy. Federal as well as state courts play an important role in our society. This is where decisions are made as to whether a citizen committed a crime and what punishment should be imposed. The court also brings peaceful resolutions for private parties in civil litigation where rights and obligations must be decided.

Decisions made by a court may have serious consequences for litigants and, in turn, may set precedents for the resolution of similar disputes in the future.

As you all know, our legal system consists of state and federal courts. They both co-exist under the United States Constitution, following the principles of federalism. The U.S. Constitution recognizes certain areas of special interest for the federal jurisdiction, while also respecting the power that state jurisdictions have to regulate all legal activities that are not expressly reserved for the federal jurisdiction.

The federal government, and therefore the federal court, has an obligation to decide controversies of a Constitutional nature, as well as those involving U.S. laws and treaties. It also has the power to decide controversies of an environmental, maritime, and national defense nature. On the other hand, state courts protect the judicial relation stemming from all matters commonly linked to local governance concepts, and cover all issues befalling the state sphere of authority, such as education, law enforcement, health, public works, contracts, family and probate laws, as well as local criminal matters.

The hierarchy of federal courts is very simple. Created under Article III of the U.S. Constitution, we have the United States Supreme Court at the highest level, followed by a national network of U.S. Courts of Appeal divided into twelve regional circuits, and one federal circuit with special jurisdiction. Finally, we have the U.S. District Courts, organized into ninety-four districts. The District of Puerto Rico, our federal court, is one of those.

Federal courts have a special or limited jurisdiction. Therefore, they do not have the same jurisdiction state courts have, which we define as courts of general jurisdiction. Federal jurisdiction covers those cases in which the United States is a party, constitutional and federal law cases, disputes involving foreign diplomats, and a broad range of controversies over which federal courts have been granted specific jurisdiction by the United States Congress. These include bankruptcy cases, violations to federal criminal laws, and civil rights violations for which citizens may sue public officers directly. We also handle cases under Puerto Rico laws when the parties reside in different states (diversity of citizenship) and the amount exceeds \$75,000.

Many of the cases filed in federal court involve the application of federal employment laws. The U.S. Congress has empowered us to hear civil cases when there has been employment discrimination on the basis of race, religious beliefs, gender, or other personal characteristics that are irrelevant to job performance. A typical civil case in federal court may be one in which an employer refused to hire a woman precisely because she was a woman. Another case may involve a citizen's right to receive compensation under the Social Security Act.

Matters that involve federal anti-trust laws or violations to those laws that regulate interstate commerce may also be brought before a federal court.

The criminal cases we hear may involve bank robberies, carjackings, post office theft, drug importation and distribution — generally on a large scale. While it may be true that state courts hear a larger number of cases than federal courts do, it is also true that most federal cases have a national impact because of the nature of the laws we must enforce, and the nature of the rights we must protect.

Civil cases begin with the filing of a complaint, or lawsuit. Criminal cases begin when the U.S. Attorney's office, through the institution of the Grand Jury, charges a citizen with having committed a federal crime — generally serious types of crimes that affect the balance in the state-federal relationship.

You may be surprised when I tell you that not all cases go to trial on the merits. Nine out of every ten civil cases are settled or concluded without going to trial. Likewise, most criminal cases filed in federal court are resolved by guilty pleas.

Those controversies that end up going to trial are decided in an adversarial system. In this process, the parties, through their attorneys, present their witnesses and legal arguments before the federal judge and a jury. The initiating party — plaintiff or prosecutor — has the burden of proof. We decide civil cases on the preponderance of the evidence. Criminal cases have a more rigorous standard. The defendant is presumed innocent until the prosecution proves his or her guilt beyond all reasonable doubt.

In future columns I will be informing you about other related subjects. Until then, all that is left is to invite our community to visit the United States District Court for the District of Puerto Rico. I will personally see to it that you enjoy your visit. You will be able to observe the judges doing their work together with the attorneys and court employees. See you soon.

*Translated into English by Janis Palma, USCCI, Official Staff Interpreter
United States District Court for the District of Puerto Rico*